

“Attitudes of preservice teachers towards teaching deaf and ESL students”

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“If I hadn’t lost my hearing, I wouldn’t be where I am now. It forced me to maximize my own potential. I have to be better than the average person to succeed”- Lou Ferrignoç

Introduction

In Colombia and around the world, the number of deaf students enrolling to university programs have been increased, but, taking an academic program does not guarantee the quality of deaf students’ education although taking academic courses don’t guarantee quality education for the deaf. We have found many documents, thesis and articles which expose the teaching and learning difficulties that deaf students and teachers face in order to achieve the academic expectations when teaching and learning English as a second language.

In this document we will discuss the complexity around education for the deaf. The most important issue to consider is about the long process students have to assume when they learn English as a foreign language. All human beings acquire a mother tongue during their first few years of life; for many of the hearing impaired, the mother tongue is a sign language code that differs according to place of origin. Sign languages are significantly disparate from oral languages in that they are not produced or perceived in the same way as oral languages. This is to say, sign languages rely on visual perception, whereas oral languages depend on auditory perception. As a reflection we discuss about how effective is for deaf students to learn a language they will never speak, they will never listen and which is not communicatively useful abroad.

Analysis and criticism:

Ting & Gilmore (2012), in their article “**Attitudes of Preservice Teachers Towards Teaching Deaf and ESL Students**” evidences that in some cases the academic and behavioral expectations of the teachers toward deaf students are lower in comparison to the hearing students but Domagala (2009), highlights that when teaching a foreign language to handicapped students “there are no psychological or methodological obstructions to teaching foreign languages to the deaf” (pp.1) On the other hand, we consider that in order to have a successful inclusive classroom, the considerations described in the article are not enough. We would complement it with the following strategies stated by Cawton (2001). Firstly, class sizes should be reduced in order to allow teachers to give individualized attention to students. In Colombia classrooms normally enroll thirty or more students. In inclusive education the number of learners is usually fewer, varying from fifteen to eighteen, allowing learners to have more possibilities to participate and thus to develop language skills. Besides, Domagala (2009) underlined that the number of deaf students in an English class should not be more than three. It enables the teacher to monitor deaf students’ work. Cawton (2001) also mentions that there is a need to create an inclusive environment by means of pictures, posters, and other visual material so as to maximize opportunities for deaf learners to use their visual perceptions acquiring linguistic knowledge. The classroom arrangement should facilitate the interaction of all learners and permit eye contact among teachers, interpreters and students. When Ting & Gilmore (2012), mentioned how helplessness and dependency appears when there is no encouragement of participation in the classroom we relate it totally with the role of the teacher as one of the ways of communication of the students with the rest of the class, (Stinson and Liu, 1999) says that in regular classroom teachers should maintain close communication with the teacher of the deaf in order to share experiences and to foster deaf students’ participation and learning. In addition, teachers should organize integration activities and create situations that encourage deaf students’ interaction with the class. When there is a specific difficulty involving deaf student and a hearing student, it is the teacher of the deaf who should promote strategies or offer suggestions that will maintain a harmonious learning environment. Gerner de Garcia (1995) proposed that institutions need to

provide special training for deaf students, focusing on linguistic competence and sign language acquisition and improvement. Sign language is generally considered to be the best way for deaf students to acquire the knowledge that can allow them access to higher education (UNESCO, 1995), but in our Colombian setting; specially Pereira, none of the English teachers of the deaf have knowledge on sign languages.

Domagala (2009) says that the methods and approaches of teaching English to deaf are not different from the ones used in regular classrooms. According to Gerner de Garcia (1995), this means that teachers should work with students individually and get to know them well so as to improve teaching techniques.

We agree with both authors when they refer to the inclusion and equality in classrooms but we consider that inclusion does not mean to use the same curriculum or plan of studies, it is related to how teachers adapt their schools or colleges requirements based on students needs, this opinion took our analyzes to the following area:

According to Ting & Gilmore (2012), the teachers' attitude in the classroom is reflected on the student's academic performance and the authors suggest a training for pre-service teachers based on student's needs; we agree taking into account that a 21st century classroom should be students' centered and there is an evident need to accommodate teachers' teaching styles to students' needs; nevertheless, there is a dilemma when teaching deaf students, it is that some of those teachers attitudes force the class to be in lower academic degree and some teachers with high expectations ask students to work at the same level of hearing students. Personally, we consider that schools and colleges should train their teachers on many other areas of knowledge and one of these is related to learning styles. The concept of "preferences in learning styles" is defined by Gasha (1990, pp. 23-24) as preferences students have for thinking, relating to others, and particular classroom environments and experiences" (pp. 23-24). The results of Stinson et al (1999) study showed that deaf students preferred the collaborative and dependent styles. Dependent students, according to Hruska-Rieachmann and Grasha (1982), are the ones "who show little intellectual curiosity and who learn only what is required". On the other hand, the competitive style corresponds to students described as suspicious of their peers leading to competition for rewards and recognition (Grasha and

Reichmann, 1974). In this study, deaf students who preferred a competitive style obtained lower scores on achievement tests than students with normal hearing obtained in the same tests (Grasha, 1996). Grasha's findings point to the extent to which deaf students are unprepared to face the competitive approaches used by college professors (Stinson and Liu, 1999), knowing these issues make us reflect on the huge process that school and colleges with deaf students enrolled in their programs have to go through but the lack of knowledge and resources interrupt and address the academic process by the wrong ways.

Summarizing, it is important for further research to be acquainted with the pedagogical practices and approaches used by teachers with experience and no experience in deaf education. We want to evidence the importance of all strategies to conduct improvements in favor of education for deaf students. Also, it is necessary a research on training programs for Colombian teachers and staff members so that they can be more effectively prepare deaf students to face real world demands, job requirements and communicative needs.

There are some professional requirements established in Lineamientos de Capacidad Auditiva (Ministerio de Educacion Nacional) for those who work with deaf students. First, teachers for the deaf should have a certificate of academic training on teaching the deaf. Additionally, they should be able to use Colombian sign language (Lenguaje de Señas Colombiano, or LSC). Also, the teachers should show interest in educational research. They should be able to evaluate and assess educational processes under different circumstances – for example, curriculum adaptations and adjustments. Teachers of the deaf should be able to propose, carry out, and improve educational projects aimed at the inclusion of deaf. If teachers' adjustments to the curriculum align with students' learning styles, this will positively affect the learning environment (Andrews, 1981).

Teachers with special training in deaf education are called teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing (D/HH) as distinguished from regular classroom teachers (Lang and Stinson, 1999).

In his work "Anything But Silent", Drolsbaugh (2004) says that ASL (American Sign Language) should not be held responsible for the deaf community's illiteracy problem. For our particular case, it can be said that it is difficult to teach English to a deaf person whose primary language is Colombian Sign Language (CSL); "it is as if you're trying to teach English to someone whose primary language is not English. The deaf person must learn to read and write English. In order to do this, deaf students also need a teacher who knows ASL" Drolsbaugh (2004) or in our context teachers of the deaf should have knowledge of CSL, it is important in our opinion to replace the interpreter in the class due the fact they are in the classroom to give support to the deaf students but they also affect their learning process. In Colombian universities, there are internal institutions in charge of providing the deaf students with the interpreters, during the English courses. The interpreter's role is to mediate between deaf students and the speaking world around them. The interpreters assist the deaf students individually while they are in class and help them with all the educational adaptation at the university (to help deaf students in the processes of subscription, documentation, classroom routines at the university, and many other everyday university events). During regular classes, which are held in Spanish, the interpreters are asked to translate the teacher's instruction into sign language and to assist deaf students with academic activities such as library work, group activities, and other tasks university students usually do. What is more, the interpreters translate English teacher's instruction at university courses. We consider that the role of the interpreter affects the English learning process of the deaf students because deaf students receive interpreter's help in the class, students tend to use their mother tongue; in this case, Colombian Sign Language to communicate and there is few space for English interaction. It is the interpreter's responsibility to be the communicative link between the English teacher and students but definitely, we should reflect about how much sense it could be to teach an oral foreign language to the deaf by using sign language.

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